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White House rebuffs Dole Contra strategy

Former aide to Borge to meet with president

By Christopher Simpson
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At night, Nicaraguan defector Alvaro Baldizon prays for sleep. But often his prayers go unanswered.

Instead, Mr. Baldizon tosses and turns, gazes at the darkened walls and is consumed by worry and guilt.

His thoughts are with his wife and 7-year-old son, both under house arrest in Nicaragua, according to Mr. Baldizon — victims of government harassment since he left the country to publicize atrocities committed by the Sandinista government.

Today, Mr. Baldizon will recount some of those grisly tales during a meeting with President Reagan, who, like the defector, is working hard to win congressional approval of a \$100 million aid request to the Nicaraguan resistance forces.

"I will tell Mr. Reagan today what I have tried to bring to light since I left Nicaragua," Mr. Baldizon, 26, said through an interpreter. "That is what is important."

Mr. Baldizon, slight and frail, a former high-ranking Sandinista official, fears he may never see his loved ones again because he is stepping up efforts to discredit Nicaragua's Marxist government. That endeavor will crest by next Wednesday when the House votes on the president's aid request.

Mr. Baldizon's public relations war, which includes firsthand accounts of widespread human rights abuses by the Sandinista government, appears to be succeeding.

Officials at the State Department have spent hundreds of hours interviewing the Managua native. They said virtually none of his often harrowing tales of Nicaraguan life can be refuted.

Eight months ago, Mr. Baldizon's stories of government atrocities garnered little attention. Now, with corroboration from U.S. intelligence sources, he has won a great deal of respect at the State Department, at the White House and on Capitol Hill.

Because of his close ties to Interior Minister Tomas Borge, Mr. Baldizon, a former Marxist and government special investigator, had a uniquely valuable insider's look at the Managua regime.

Virtually all of this Mr. Baldizon has relayed in minute detail to the State Department, information they said is priceless.

The Sandinista government's lock on the civilian population, he said, is rooted in well-planned repression of human rights. Among the tactics used are imprisonment of dissidents, murder, rape and torture. Drug trafficking by government officials and widespread graft go to the highest levels of the regime, he said.

The government is bolstering the military with criminals, about 800 Soviet "advisers" and 3,000 Cuban troops, many of whom pilot helicopters against the resistance, he said.

He has outlined myriad times how international terrorists have been sheltered and trained inside Nicaragua. He also has given detailed accounts of how foreign visitors are

duped into believing that abuses do not occur and religious leaders are not oppressed.

Having appeared once before a congressional panel, dozens of times privately with lawmakers and at a handful of press conferences, Mr. Baldizon has shocked even the most thick-skinned with his stories.

He believes those revelations may help his family and friends at home, many of whom are closely tied to the resistance. But still he can't shake the nagging worries about his wife and son's safety. And he second-guesses his decision to flee from Nicaragua, a well-planned defection made last July when Mr. Baldizon tricked colleagues into believing his trip close to the Honduran border was official business.

"It was about 5:30 in the afternoon, and I was supposed to be investigating a border-crossing point to Honduras where contraband was coming in," he said. "Because I was the chief, I sent the other investigators to interview peasants nearby."

"There was a point near the border, about 70 meters wide, where I could cross," he said. "I had to stay within that 70-meter line. If I stepped outside it, there were mines planted by the Sandinistas." Mr. Baldizon said that near sundown he swam across a narrow river, then walked through the jungle for several hours before reaching a Honduran military outpost. After a month

of waiting, the Honduran government allowed him to fly to the United States, he said.

But by then, he said, his family had already suffered the consequences of his defection.

"Three days after I left, at 1 a.m. in the morning, the security police

captured my wife and put her in jail," said Mr. Baldizon, who has not talked to his family since last July, but gets reports from contacts in Nicaragua. "I didn't divulge to my wife what I was going to do because it would jeopardize my plans."

"I thought once I was out of the country, my family would not be harmed," he said. "The only plan I divulged was to tell my brother that if anything happened to me, help my family."

Mr. Baldizon said his wife was jailed in Managua for three weeks. He said she was subsequently released to be hospitalized, suffering from depression that bordered on a nervous breakdown.

Since then, he said, the Nicaraguan police "visit my home three and four times a week to interrogate my family, harass and torture them" into signing statements against him.

"They have threatened to take away my son and the jobs held by members of my wife's family," he said. "Clearly I have made declarations [against the Sandinista government], and every time I do, some official arrives at my house."

"When I make public declarations [in the United States], the first who knows is Tomas Borge," he said. "He is more informed than the North American public."

Officials at the Nicaraguan Embassy in Washington deny Mr. Baldizon's stories, but he has found sympathy from members of Congress.

"There is very little chance I will see my family again, at least not in immediate future," he said. "My wife has been on tranquilizers since I left, and my son, Alvaro, is suffering

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Alvaro Baldizon

from depression and anemia. If I had known this would happen, I would have stayed."

Mr. Baldizon said his goal now is to recount, as often as possible, the atrocities in Nicaragua he witnessed firsthand. Government officials in Managua have harrassed his family in hopes he would curtail his revelations, Mr. Baldizon said, but he refuses.

"It would make no difference to my family if I stopped now," he said. "So I will continue. I am worried somewhat about my safety, though. From what I know of the network of KGB agents in the United States, I know there is no place I can hide. I'm just living day by day at this point."